

Chapman University Chapman University Digital Commons

English Faculty Articles and Research

English


10-1996

Once Upon a Time in Hollywood; or, the Commodification of Form in the Adaptation of Fictional Texts to the Hollywood Cinema

Mark Axelrod

Chapman University, axelrod@chapman.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/english_articles

 Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), and the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Axelrod, Mark. Once Upon a Time in Hollywood; or, the Commodification of Form in the Adaptation of Fictional Texts to the Hollywood Cinema. *Literature/Film Quarterly* 24.2 (October 1996): 201-08.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Chapman University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Articles and Research by an authorized administrator of Chapman University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact laughtin@chapman.edu.

Once Upon a Time in Hollywood; or, the Commodification of Form in the Adaptation of Fictional Texts to the Hollywood Cinema

Comments

This article was originally published in *Literature/Film Quarterly*, volume 24, issue 2, in 1996.

Copyright

Salisbury State University

Once Upon a Time in Hollywood; or, The Commodification of Form in the Adaptation Of Fictional Texts to the Hollywood Cinema

When I once asked a film composer friend if he had seen the remake of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* he responded with the comment, "No, but I heard the soundtrack." It was, of course, an ironic response, but as an ironic response it makes an implicit statement on the relationship between cinematic and literary forms as well as cinematic and musical ones. The usual response to the query "have you read such-and-such a novel?" is often "No, but I've seen the movie," or vice versa, both of which imply an equivalence of art forms, so that the relationship between what one reads and what one sees, based on the same material, is somehow equal as well. However, another response that "I saw the movie and it's better than the book," or vice versa, somehow implies an inequivalence. In other words, there is something integrally superior in one that is apparently inferior in the other. Caught in between the art forms as either being equivalent or not, one is also left foundering between whether the art forms are equal or not. Obviously, they are not, but for someone to think that in some way they are equal, or may be or could be, implies a method of adaptation that is generally incumbent upon the target material adapted, which is usually, though not always, fiction. Though in fact original screenplays can be "novelized," that, in itself, is a purely commercial process of "reverse adaptation" in which the commodification is nothing more than the unmitigated attempt to expand a 120-page screenplay into a "novel-like" form of between 180 and 240 pages by merely expanding the linear narrative and the preexisting dialogue; but what we're interested in is how fiction is "cinematized."

What is in question is how a work of fiction is adapted to the screen in such a way that a reader/viewer can postulate it is or isn't as good as the original text. What is a reader/viewer comparing? Metaphor? Irony? Style? Is it something that is fundamentally rooted within the structure of the text that is being compared or is it something else? Is it the symphony of the sentence, its rhythm, the ability of the writer to master his/her material that is translated for the reader/viewer to synthesize? Is it, perhaps, the power and expression of the dialogue? Or is it merely the beauty of the written word? Actually, it is none of these. What reader/viewers tend to compare consciously or unconsciously are the veritable cornerstones of traditional "Realistic" fiction; that is, story line and character, and how these fictional idioms are conveyed; namely, through a linear narrative that has the correct proportions of agitation and resolution coupled with a dialogue that propels the story line toward its inevitable, and usually obvious, conclusion. In other words, how the story is told and with what efficacy the characters are realistically presented become the standards on which the work is evaluated. This form of adapting material often tends to undermine the effusive nature of a work of fiction by transforming it, transfiguring it, into a linear narrative that pays homage to the "state of realism," or the "state of storytelling" that was founded upon the principles of narration doubtlessly begun with Aesop, if not Moses, and polished by Walter Scott and Balzac.

But the question still lingers: "Why is this aspect of Aristotelian poetics, of telling a story in a particular manner, so appealing to Hollywood?" Presumably, it is because that particular movement is familiar to the public. Of all the elements Aristotle analyzes in the *Poetics*,

plot "holds first place" and plot, "in its fullest sense is the artistic equivalent of 'action' in real life" (Butcher 334). In other words audiences are shown a film the plot structure of which somehow resembles stories they have been told in the past, which has an element of action, mainly external, that propels the plot forward. It is not that the story itself is similar in content (though Hollywood thrives on the iterative), but the manner in which it is told is familiar. But Hollywood has not stopped with appropriating certain Aristotelian notions of story line, it has appropriated Joseph Campbell as well, whose studies in myth have been keenly applied on a structural level. A study of many action-adventure-Western hero-dominated Hollywood films will show that their story structure and resolution owe a great deal to Campbell's multifaced hero whose evolution can be stylized along any one of a number of preordained story typologies in which the twelve stages of a hero's quest and the three stages of the journey (i.e., separation, initiation, return) respond to the Hollywood thirst for a satisfying and leisure-intensive structure. This structure, which clearly establishes the linear process the hero must travel in order to resolve his/her conflicts, has been used quite effectively by Hollywood "script doctors" who are called in when the original structure of a particular script is "not working." The resemblance is in the form in which the tale is told and the commodification of that form is the manner in which the Hollywood film industry has co-opted the original material in order to make it adhere to the principles of formulaic commercial filmmaking. Such a commodification gives new "meaning" to the notion of a "master narrative."

If we can return to one of the primers of novel criticism, Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, it states that narratives should be realistic, dramatic, and "that the choice of evocative 'situations and chains of events' is the writer's most important gift—or, as Aristotle put a similar point, the 'most important of all it the structure of incidents'" (97). And the structure of incidents, especially in a proper order, is of paramount importance in Hollywood filmmaking. And that structure is unquestionably a structure with a well-defined beginning, middle, and end. In that order. Of course, Booth has his own biases since he mentions Beckett and Butor only once each and doesn't mention any Latin American writers at all, while Henry James is cited no fewer than 200 times; however, Booth's biases are not the exception, but the rule. In Philip Stevick's *The Theory of the Novel*, Phyllis Bentley writes in the "Art of the Narrative" *vis-à-vis* Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (filmed in 1932 and 1935) "and so it goes on through this and every other English novel written between 1719 and 1919: scene, summary, description, scene, summary. The blend of scene, summary and description is—or was between 1719 and 1919 (Defoe and Woolf)—the novelist's medium, his fictitious prose narrative; through and by this he must present his material; through and by this he must portray characters and actions representative of reality in a story line of more or less complexity; through and by this he must give us that patterned impression of dynamic life which is the purpose of all art" (57). Of course, in this theory of the novel, as in most, the novel begins and ends in England and the virtuosity of anything occurring farther north than Berwick-on-Tweed (condolences to Alasdair Gray) or farther south than Cornwall (unless one includes the Malvinas as England's lands-end) doesn't gain much credence, but Bentley's dogma does account for the fact that in those 200 years of devotion to a standardized, linear narrative garnished by scenes, summaries, and descriptions, readers and, by extension, viewers have absorbed a particular way of realizing the world and that realization has become the *sine qua non* of the screen adapter's craft.

But in addition to the fixtures of scene, summary, and description, the narrative, linear as it may be, in order to fulfill the substantive quota of narrative elements, must also include a "strong" story line and "relatable" characters since story line and character are needed to "tell a good tale." Norman Friedman's essay "Forms of the Plot" explains that, "These, then, are the three variables we must consider in defining and understanding the central change around which story lines are built: the protagonist's state of mind, his character and behavior, and his situation with regard to the external environment" (Stevick 151). Friedman then goes on to talk about several kinds of story lines beginning with "The Action Plot" about which Friedman writes that it is "the first and most primitive type of plot also, I daresay, the most common in terms of the reading public as a whole. The primary, and often the sole,

interest lies in 'what happens next,' and the characters and their thought are portrayed minimally in terms of the bare necessities required to forward the action. That is to say, we rarely, if ever, become involved here in any serious moral or intellectual issue; nor does the outcome have any far-reaching consequences for the fortune, character, or thought of the protagonist, leaving him free to start all over again, it may be, in a sequel; and the pleasures we experience are wholly those of suspense, expectation, and surprise, the plot being organized around a basic puzzle and solution cycle" (Stevick 157-58). Friedman continues by categorizing these types as being adventure, detective, western, or science-fiction/fantasy stories. What is revealing about this statement is that it not only validates the "normal" criteria for narrative storytelling, but substantiates the genres which Friedman indicates are the genres which are or have been the most popular among film audiences. Though some of these genres are cross-overs (e.g., *Star Wars* as a science-fiction/Western or *Indiana Jones* as a science-fiction/adventure) they constitute the lowest common denominator in the arsenal of Hollywood fabrication. The Hollywood trade magazine *Variety* annually reports the financial figures for the top grossing films of all time which validates that as well. *Batman*, *Jurassic Park*, *Star Wars*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Superman*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *ET*, *Return of the Jedi*, *Star Trek*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* all have grossed in excess of \$100 million each. These figures could hardly go unnoticed by the moguls who run the Hollywood film factories. As Adorno has written in *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*, "movies and radio need no longer pretend to be art. The truth that they are just business is made into an ideology to justify the rubbish they deliberately produce" (121). Though one may argue whether these films are "artistic" or not, one cannot argue against them being commodities and it is difficult to exist within a market economy without becoming a commodity oneself. Even Brecht opined about writing in Hollywood that "If Arthur Koestler can make money writing pornography, I can do it writing films" (Lyon 46). Just as certain Hollywood screenwriters become commodified as being "hot properties" so too are the expressions of their craft: the scripts. This commodification applies not only to content, but to length and even typeface. A script of fewer than 100 pages or more than 130 becomes an economic liability and a script printed in something other than courier becomes a typographic "postmodern" alien.

Paralleling the element of story line is the element of character and in speaking of character Forster pleads "that we shall no longer expect them (characters) to coincide as a whole with daily life, only to parallel it" (65). Forster then proceeds to divide characters into the "flat" group and the "round" group. The former "are constructed round a single idea or quality; when there is more than one factor in them, we get the beginning of the curve towards the round" (67). Flat characters, for Forster, are like Dickens's Mrs. Micawber or Proust's Princess of Parma. Round characters are those which are capable of "surprising in a convincing way" like all the main characters in *War and Peace*, all of Dostoevsky's characters, Madame Bovary, Tom Jones. In Hollywood terms, what makes these characters "round" is their ability to be "life like" or "relatable" or "heroic." Flat characters are not profitable in Hollywood. Round characters are. Butch and Sundance, Thelma and Louise, Rocky and Rambo, Dirty Harry are characters around whom story lines develop, around whom the narrative begins, middles, and ends. The flat characters are "supporting" characters and, like their cinematic counterparts, exist solely to act in counterpoint to the main character(s). Round characters are memorable; flat ones, unless they look like Michael J. Pollard or act like Christopher Lloyd, generally are not. So these items of story line and character, conveyed in a linear narrative that is framed by description, scene, and summary are what make a novel—at least a traditional, Realistic novel, novel—and which lend themselves to adaptability, a verisimilitude that appeases the financial mandates of the Hollywood film industry. The irony here is that Forster, whose major works (*A Passage to India*, *Maurice*, *A Room with a View*, *Howards End*) have all been adapted to the screen because of their clear structural suitability and because they are stories that have "a narrative of events arranged in a time sequence" (30), despised the cinema and speculated on the "novel being killed" by it (171). Were he alive he would certainly have relished the revitalization of his

work Merchant-Ivory has given it and the fact that *A Passage to India* and *A Room with a View* both have grossed in excess of \$12 million each. Perhaps his estate is grateful.

It would appear then that particular texts are preferable for standardization and exploitation within the Hollywood film industry because of the way they are written while other texts that appear to be "radical" (if they are adapted) are reduced to a kind of cinematic homogenization that precludes any formalized comparison between what's read in the text and what's seen on the screen. As we might expect, the works that generally tend to be adapted are the type that easily lend themselves to adaptability in both story line and character. They are the kind of texts that one would find presented as a mini-series on *Masterpiece Theatre*. In other words, they are simplified linear narratives, with well-constructed story lines, and rounded characters; they are easy to open, easy to close, and easily understood. Balzac's *Le Père Goriot*, Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*, or Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* would be preferable to Beckett's *Watt* or Cortázar's *Hopscotch* or Calvino's *if on a winter's night a traveler* or Sarda's *Cobra*. In other words, works that have a linear story line and can be reduced to a formulated and formalized prescription tend to have more "market appeal" than those that do not and, for that reason, tend to be the works chosen for adaptation. One need only recall non-Hollywood adaptations of Cortázar's short story "Las Babas del Diablo," which became the basis for Antonioni's *Blow Up*, Borges's short story "Theme of the Hero and the Traitor" which became the basis for Bertolucci's *Spider's Stratagem*, and García Márquez's melange of fictions which became the basis for *Eréndira* to see that Hollywood is not very interested in adapting those tales that have an "aberrant structure" to begin with.

One may think that's coincidental, that the selection of a work doesn't really depend on the kind of work adapted for the screen, but on the work itself. But Hollywood cinema history proves otherwise. Between 1932-65, Edgar Wallace, a master of mystery writing, had 34 of his novels made into feature films. In comparison, Agatha Christie had only 21 between 1945-85 (not including televised dramatizations) and Ian Fleming had 16 between 1964-91. Given Friedman's dictum, it is not coincidental that Wallace, Christie, and Fleming (all mystery/adventure writers) would have been, and are, some of the most adapted writers. Add to that list Robert Ludlum, John LeCarré, and Stephen King and one has cornered a sizable market. In that same period of time, there have been no feature films produced of novels written by Butor or Pinget or Christine Brooke-Rose or Flann O'Brien or, closer to Hollywood, authors such as Robert Coover or Donald Barthelme. John Barth's novel *The End of the Road* was, in comparison to his more textually convoluted works (e.g., *Lost in the Funhouse* and *Giles Goat Boy*), a "straight-up" narrative worthy of easy adaptation, as was done in 1969. Nothing of his has been done since. Likewise, Huston's making of *Under the Volcano* barely scratched the surface of that rich tapestry and his skills were better suited to something more "realistic" like *The Dead*, which was "adapted" almost word for word, while Kubrick's *Lolita*, though it captured Sellers capturing Quilty, captured neither Humbert's voice nor Nabokov's wit.

Neil Sinyard, in his *Filming Literature: The Art of Screen Adaptation*, summed up the problem quite effectively by stating that "the legacy of the nineteenth-century novel is the twentieth-century film. One of cinema's most immediate effects was to supplant the novel as the foremost art form of narrative realism" (vii). And narrative realism is the genre which is most appealing to those who tend to finance films not only as original works, but as adaptations and as remakes. Certain texts are so preferred to others that they are periodically refilmed under the same or different title. Dickens's work alone appears as a partial listing of what's been refilmed: *A Christmas Carol* has been filmed fourteen times since 1908 including the classic 1992 Muppet adaptation; *David Copperfield* six times between 1911-84; *Dombey and Son*, three times since 1931; *Great Expectations*, three times since 1934; *Nicholas Nickleby*, four times since 1912; *Oliver Twist*, nine times since 1909; *Pickwick Papers*, three times since 1912; and *Tale of Two Cities*, seven times since 1911. With Dickens, there is no such thing as going to the well too often and more than likely there will be no end to the number of remakes and perennial restagings of Dickens's work. Likewise,

Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not* was produced under that title in 1944 (script co-written by Faulkner), refilmed in 1950 as *The Breaking Point*, and refilmed again in 1958 under the title *The Gun Runners*. *The Maltese Falcon* was refilmed at least five times between 1932-91 (and once for *Masterpiece Theatre*) and both Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* and *The Razor's Edge* have been remade three times each since 1934. One may argue (for different reasons) that Dickens, Hemingway, Hammett, Flaubert, and Maugham were all literary artists, but one would be hard pressed to argue that those particular works were much less adaptable to film than Machado de Assis's *The Posthumous Memoirs of Braz Cubas* or Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* or Biely's *St. Petersburg*.

John Fowles once said that, "for a novelist in the position of having his work adapted to the screen, the director to fear is the one who swears absolute fidelity to every word" (Sinyard 135). That feeling was based on the malignment of Fowles's novel *The Magus*, but not every author feels the same about non-allegiance to words and their adaptation. Huston's *The Dead*, for example. But Sinyard feels the "cardinal rule" of screen adaptation is "Fidelity not to the letter of the source, but to the spirit" (x), a rule which Beckett would have been one of the first to break since even when a text is allegedly adapted in spirit what often results is a work totally lacking in anything which even approaches the original. For example, David Mamet felt that his *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* was so brutally destroyed in TriStar's *About Last Night*, he walked off the set. The "bastardization" of Paddy Chayefsky's *Altered States* prompted him to remove his name from the film credits, and when asked what Isaac Bashevis Singer thought about Barbra Streisand's adaptation of *Yentl* the master politely replied that one should not try to do everything there is to do in a film by oneself. Politic indeed. Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* was filmed in a conservative attempt to take advantage of the popularity of the novel. According to Sinyard, "it was felt that the presence of an invisible or even visible narrator (Peter Ustinov, perhaps) could be used to approximate Fowles's interventions in his novel and narrate the author's modern reflections on the historical events he invents and describes. But this would probably have seemed irritating and artificial" (135). Instead, they solved the "problem" in an "ingenious" way: a film within a film. The problem, as Sinyard sees it, and as most producers would probably see it, is that the text was too convoluted, too self-conscious, too "postmodern" to be played the way it was, so they decided to create not one, but two "realistic" narratives. It is hardly doing justice to the "spirit" of the text if a present-day narrator is commenting on a Victorian love story through asides, flash-forwards, multiple endings, footnotes, epigraphs, and scenes that include the author himself. To say that using a visible or invisible narrator would have seemed "irritating and artificial" misses the point. The difference is that the use of two rather conventional story lines within a single film gave the pretense of doing something "radical" while only perpetuating and reinforcing an industrialized form. To help commercially, they also chose Harold Pinter to write the script, Karel Reisz to direct, and Meryl Streep and Jeremy Irons to perform. In other words, the producers tried to hedge their investment even while creating a "radical" script.

At this time one may ask, "But what about the director? the alleged 'auteur'?" Doesn't s/he have an appropriate vision of the final product?" The answer is a profound "kind of," but within certain parameters and the parameters, as far as the script is concerned, are generally followed by the directors. At least Hollywood directors. At least Hollywood directors who want their films funded. The myth that directors are somehow in control of the entire project (one generally fomented by academicians who've never worked as extras) has been perpetuated to the same degree that the quest of Joseph Campbell's hero has and in terms of screen adaptations the director's ability to run amok is even more limited, given the "scriptural" liabilities of adapted works.

Adaptations of such texts as *The French Lieutenant's Woman* or *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, though both fundamentally well-crafted films in Hollywood terms, tend to ignore the posture of the text. That is to say, what tends to get adapted is not the stylistic essence of the text, or its spirit, but the linear narrative within the text. A work like Laclos's *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* was an exceptional epistolary novel, due mainly to Laclos's extraordinary

handling of voice within the context of the letters. The letters are dated and arranged so that the narrative is held within bounds of passing days and weeks; correspondence is written because circumstances require it and the content expresses individual character through thought, feeling, and style. The brevity of some letters allows separate versions of a particular event, or a fresh view of a character, to emerge as the story line unfolds. The letters contain scenes which are described with enough concrete detail for them to be visualized easily and no lengthy descriptions of appearance, bearing, and facial expression are needed to get a sense of who the characters are. Yet in the film, screenwriter Christopher Hampton, a playwright by practice, a French scholar by education, ignored the epistolary virtues of the form and opted instead for the time-tested virtues of Hollywood cinema production: story line and character. In a way, Hampton Hollywoodized Laclos by gerrymandering the text and transmogrifying epistolary Paris into a kind of *Dallas* replete with fashionable costumes, North American accents, and McDonald's table manners.

What seems to be apparent, at least in the Hollywood film industry, is that certain works lend themselves more naturally to the economic function of the screen than others and those that don't are modified for the sake of profitability. Though this entire notion eventually leads to the inkwell of screenwriting commodification, what needs to be understood is that the Hollywood film industry is regulated by a profitability digest that virtually consumes the essence of even its own most-popular journals *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter*. Each year *Variety*'s Cannes Edition lists the "All-Time Film Rental Champs." This section is particularly telling since it never offers a listing of "All-Time Critically Acclaimed Films" or "All-Time Most Unprofitable Films." No, these are film rental champions. But without going into a tedious deconstruction of the phrase "all-time" or the word "champion," it's particularly interesting to see which most-successful films were adapted from novels and what those novels were.

In 1926, *The Birth of a Nation* made \$10 million and *Ben Hur* grossed \$4.5 million. The former was based on Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman* and *The Leopard's Spots* and the latter on the Lew Wallace novel. In 1939, *Gone with the Wind* grossed over \$77 million. In 1959, a remake of *Ben Hur* grossed almost \$37 million. In 1965, *The Sound of Music*, based on the *Story of the Trapp Family Singers*, grossed over \$79 million and the film adaptation of Pasternak's *Dr. Zhivago* grossed over \$47 million. In 1975, Peter Benchley's *Jaws* grossed over \$129 million, W.P. Blatty's *The Exorcist* over \$89 million, and Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* over \$86 million. In 1983, Larry McMurtry's *Terms of Endearment* grossed over \$50 million, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (minus the lesbian overtones) over \$48 million, and Isak Denisen's *Out of Africa* over \$43 million. Granted, much of the success of these films must be attributed to the star system in Hollywood, since Edmund O'Brien as Rhett Butler, Dom Deluise as the Godfather, Roseanne Barr as Isak Dinesen, and Wallace Shawn as Batman would, no doubt, have made major monetary dents in their respective films. But star systems notwithstanding, what is common to all of these films, with or without special effects, is that each of them inculcates the traditional notion of story telling. The story telling structure is imperative if one is to understand the tenor of the Hollywood film industry. The query "What's it about?" begs a demarcation. The bromide in Hollywood is that if a screenwriter can pitch what a story is about in three lines or ten seconds (whichever is shorter) s/he is a genius. So much for Joyce or Cervantes. That's one of the reasons Fitzgerald failed as a screenwriter.

No matter how the text starts out, inevitably what becomes adapted in a Hollywood film is a story line with rounded characters and linear story development. Something that perpetuates an answer to the inevitable question "What's next?" It is not puzzling that Edgar Wallace, Agatha Christie, and Ian Fleming (dead or alive) have held such popular appeal with Hollywood producers. As we have seen, traditional mysteries and thrillers are perfectly formulated for adaptation since they are full of action and character and story line. They tantalize the senses and invigorate interest. Nor is it puzzling to see scads of "how to write screenplay" manuals which constantly repeat the same structures of beginning, middle, and end, plus the obligatory pair of story line points that propel the story line forward. As a

matter of fact, each year the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences sponsors a national contest for new screenwriters. In the rules that accompany the application there is a section titled "A few words of advice" in which they write, "Significant problems and conflicts need to surface near the beginning of your story, not in the last act. Introduce characters and problems in the first 20-30 pages, escalate those conflicts over the next 60 pages, then draw the tale to a climax and conclusion." And so the perpetuation of an industrialized form continues in spite of Christian Metz's option that a "script-writer's cinema" actually exists or may have.

One often hears the statement that film *is* literature or film should be *like* literature, but literature, as I understand it, is dynamic in its form as well as its content primarily because the evolution of fiction has been a dynamic process in form as well as content. The novel from Scott to García Márquez, the short story from Chekhov to Borges has not been static. Literary (as opposed to commercial) fiction has not become commodified. But Hollywood film, to a great measure, has. And not just Hollywood film. The "formula" has become so pervasive that even cinematic "renegades" like Terry Gilliam have been "victimized" by the commodification process. For adaptations genuinely to reflect the spirit of the original, the isolation of one or two elements will not suffice. As Adorno has written, "The whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry. The old experience of the movie-goer, who sees the world outside as an extension of the film he has just left (because the latter is intent upon reproducing the world of everyday perceptions) is now the producer's guideline. The more intensely and flawlessly his techniques duplicate empirical objects, the easier it is today for the illusion to prevail that the outside world is the straightforward continuation of that presented on the screen" (Adorno 126). It is not that there aren't artists capable of utilizing innovations in writing for film, it is just that the Hollywood film industry has had an opportunity to follow either Lumière or Méliès and has chosen the former as the shining path to the silver dollar, often at the expense of any other artistic or social reality. And political implications in the broad stroke, both implicit and explicit, are often written out of a script if they may be perceived as having negative box-office appeal. This would include, but not be limited to, issues of homosexuality, of homelessness, and of attacks on the mother of all social issues, capitalism. But regardless of issues of content, the form remains an ideological tool in the arsenal of Hollywood production which must be adhered to, if not sanctified, if one is to become a maker of feature films.

Quoting Georges Duhamel's *Scènes de la vie future* (1930) Walter Benjamin writes that movies were "a pastime for helots, a diversion for the uneducated, wretched, worn-out creatures who are consumed by their worries, a spectacle which requires no concentration and presupposes no intelligence, which kindles no light in the heart and awakens no hope other than the ridiculous one of someday becoming a 'star' in Los Angeles" (239). Six decades later Hollywood has yet to dispel the notion and the commodification of film form which lives on in the hearts and minds of producers who are or who wish to be. The sociological and psychological implications on the register of perceptions becomes of paramount importance since it is conceivable that if an industry can manipulate the way one perceives the world and that industry has global influence the inevitable result is the homogenization of a world view that is predicated on the sanctity of cost effectiveness.

Mark Axelrod
Chapman University

Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor, and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: Continuum Publishing, 1991.
- Aristotle. *Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*. Trans. S.H. Butcher. New York: Dover Publications, 1951.

Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Trans. by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.

Booth, Wayne. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961.

Forster, E.M. *Aspects of the Novel*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1955.

Lyon, James K. *Bertolt Brecht in America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1980.

Stevick, Philip, ed. *The Theory of the Novel*. New York: The Free Press, 1967.

Sinyard, Neil. *Filming Literature: The Art of Screen Adaptation*. London: Croom Helm, 1986.

THE DAVID MAMET SOCIETY

*(The new organization for the study of David Mamet's work and
artistic performance on stage, film and television.)*

We encourage the participation and interest of scholars, students, directors, and actors. With two issues of an extensive newsletter already published, we anticipate compiling a full fledged journal in the fall of 1998. For further information, inquiries on submissions, etc. please contact our president, Leslie Kane, Department of English, Westfield State College, Westfield, MA 01086 or Chris Hudgins, our vice president, at the address below.

To join the David Mamet Society, please remit dues in U.S. dollars via check made out to The David Mamet Society, or by cash. Membership includes the newsletter, with its extensive annual bibliography, production information, reviews, and so on.

One-year membership: \$15; two-year membership: \$28;
one-year student membership: \$10

Please send dues to Chris Hudgins, Department of English, The University of Nevada Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV 89154-5011.